

In the United States Court of Federal Claims
OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS

Filed: June 24, 2024

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DAVID STIBOR, *personal representative*
of estate of YOLANDA STIBOR,

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No. 20-1304V

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Special Master Sanders

Petitioner,

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v.

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SECRETARY OF HEALTH
AND HUMAN SERVICES,

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Respondent.

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Bridget McCullough, Muller Brazil PA, Dresher, PA, for Petitioner;

Tyler King, United States Department of Justice, Washington, DC, for Respondent.

DECISION AWARDING ATTORNEYS' FEES AND COSTS¹

On October 1, 2020, David Stibor (“Petitioner”) filed a petition for compensation on behalf of the estate of Yolanda Stibor (“Ms. Stibor”) under the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program.² 42 U.S.C. § 300aa-10 to 34 (2018) (the “Vaccine Act” or “Program”). Petitioner alleged that Ms. Stibor suffered from transverse myelitis and subsequently passed away as a result of her receipt of an influenza (“flu”) vaccine on October 29, 2018. Pet. at 1, 5, ECF No. 1. On February 28, 2023, petitioner filed a motion to dismiss and on that same day I issued a decision dismissing the petition for insufficient proof. (ECF No. 41).

¹ Because this Decision contains a reasoned explanation for the action taken in this case, it must be made publicly accessible and will be posted on the United States Court of Federal Claims' website, and/or at <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/uscourts/national/cofc>, in accordance with the E-Government Act of 2002. 44 U.S.C. § 3501 note (2018) (Federal Management and Promotion of Electronic Government Services). **This means the Decision will be available to anyone with access to the internet.** In accordance with Vaccine Rule 18(b), Petitioner has 14 days to identify and move to redact medical or other information, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy. If, upon review, I agree that the identified material fits within this definition, I will redact such material from public access.

² National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986, Pub L. No. 99-660, 100 Stat. 3755.

On August 7, 2023, Petitioner filed a motion for attorneys' fees and costs. Pet'r's Mot. for Final Attorneys' Fees and Costs [hereinafter "Pet'r's Mot. for AFC"], ECF No. 46. Petitioner requests total attorneys' fees and costs in the amount of \$25,957.72, representing \$20,874.60 in attorneys' fees and \$5,083.12 in attorneys' costs. Pet'r's Mot. for AFC at 2. Pursuant to General Order No. 9, Petitioner has indicated that he has not personally incurred any costs in pursuit of his petition. *Id.* Respondent responded to the motion on August 9, 2023, stating that Respondent "is satisfied that the statutory requirements for an award of attorneys' fees and costs are met in this case." Resp't's Resp. at 2, ECF No. 47. Petitioner did not file a reply. This matter is now ripe for consideration.

I. Reasonable Attorneys' Fees and Costs

The Vaccine Act permits an award of "reasonable attorneys' fees" and "other costs." § 15(e)(1). If a petitioner succeeds on the merits of his or her claim, the award of attorneys' fees is automatic. *Id.*; see *Sebelius v. Cloer*, 133 S. Ct. 1886, 1891 (2013). However, a petitioner need not prevail on entitlement to receive a fee award as long as the petition was brought in "good faith" and there was a "reasonable basis" for the claim to proceed. § 15(e)(1). Here, although the petition was eventually dismissed, I am satisfied that good faith and reasonable basis have been met in the instant case. Respondent has also indicated he is satisfied that good faith and reasonable basis have been met. Accordingly, Petitioner is entitled to a final award of reasonable attorneys' fees and costs.

The Federal Circuit has approved the lodestar approach to determine reasonable attorneys' fees and costs under the Vaccine Act. *Avera v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 515 F.3d 1343, 1348 (Fed. Cir. 2008). This is a two-step process. *Id.* First, a court determines an "initial estimate . . . by 'multiplying the number of hours reasonably expended on the litigation times a reasonable hourly rate.'" *Id.* at 1347–48 (quoting *Blum v. Stenson*, 465 U.S. 886, 888 (1984)). Second, the court may make an upward or downward departure from the initial calculation of the fee award based on specific findings. *Id.* at 1348.

It is "well within the special master's discretion" to determine the reasonableness of fees. *Saxton v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 3 F.3d 1517, 1521–22 (Fed. Cir. 1993); see also *Hines v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 22 Cl. Ct. 750, 753 (1991). ("[T]he reviewing court must grant the special master wide latitude in determining the reasonableness of both attorneys' fees and costs."). Applications for attorneys' fees must include contemporaneous and specific billing records that indicate the work performed and the number of hours spent on said work. See *Savin v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 85 Fed. Cl. 313, 316–18 (2008). Such applications, however, should not include hours that are "excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary." *Saxton*, 3 F.3d at 1521 (quoting *Hensley v. Eckerhart*, 461 U.S. 424, 434 (1983)).

Reasonable hourly rates are determined by looking at the "prevailing market rate" in the relevant community. See *Blum*, 465 U.S. at 895. The "prevailing market rate" is akin to the rate "in the community for similar services by lawyers of reasonably comparable skill, experience and reputation." *Id.* at 895, n.11. Petitioners bear the burden of providing adequate evidence to prove that the requested hourly rate is reasonable. *Id.*

A. Hourly Rate

The decision in *McCulloch* provides a framework for consideration of appropriate ranges for attorneys' fees based upon the experience of the practicing attorney. *McCulloch v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 09-293V, 2015 WL 5634323, at *19 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Sept. 1, 2015), *motion for recons. denied*, 2015 WL 6181910 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Sept. 21, 2015). The Court has since updated the *McCulloch* rates, and the Attorneys' Forum Hourly Rate Fee Schedules can be accessed online.³

Petitioner requests the following hourly rates for the work of his counsel at Muller Brazil; for Ms. Bridget McCullough, \$250.00 per hour for work performed in 2020, \$275.00 per hour for work performed in 2021, \$300.00 per hour for work performed in 2022, and \$350.00 per hour for work performed in 2023; for Ms. Shealene Mancuso, \$275.00 per hour for work performed in 2020; and for Mr. Max Muller, \$325.00 per hour for work performed in 2019, and \$400.00 per hour for work performed in 2022. These rates are consistent with what counsel have previously been awarded for their Vaccine Program work and the undersigned finds them to be reasonable herein.

B. Reasonable Number of Hours

Attorneys' fees are awarded for the "number of hours reasonably expended on the litigation." *Avera*, 515 F.3d at 1348. Counsel should not include in their fee requests hours that are "excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary." *Saxton*, 3 F.3d at 1521 (quoting *Hensley v. Eckerhart*, 461 U.S. 424, 434 (1983)). It is well-established that billing for administrative or clerical tasks is not permitted in the Vaccine Program. *See e.g., Rochester v. United States*, 18 Cl. Ct. 379, 387 (1989) (stating that services that are "primarily of a secretarial or clerical nature . . . should be considered as normal overhead office costs included within the attorneys' fee rates"); *see also Isom v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 94-770, 2001 WL 101459, at *2 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Jan. 17, 2001) (agreeing with Respondent that tasks such as filing and photocopying are subsumed under overhead expenses); *Walters v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 15-1380V, 2022 WL 1077311, at *5 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Feb. 23, 2022) (failing to award fees for the review of CM/ECF notifications and the organization of the file); *McCulloch*, 2015 WL 5634323, at *26 (noting that clerical and secretarial tasks should not be billed at all, regardless of who performs them).

Upon review, the undersigned finds the overall hours billed to be reasonable. Counsel has provided sufficiently detailed descriptions for the tasks performed, and upon review, the undersigned does not find any of the billing entries to be unreasonable. Accordingly, Petitioner is entitled to final attorneys' fees in the amount of \$20,874.60.

C. Costs

Like attorneys' fees, a request for reimbursement of attorneys' costs must be reasonable. *Perreira v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 27 Fed. Cl. 29, 34 (Fed. Cl. 1992). Petitioner requests

³ The OSM Fee Schedules are available at: <http://www.cofc.uscourts.gov/node/2914>. The hourly rates contained within the schedules are updated from the decision in *McCulloch*, 2015 WL 5634323.

a total of \$5,083.12 in attorneys' costs. This amount is comprised of acquisition of medical records, postage, process server fees, and the Court's filing fee. Pet'r's Mot. for AFC, Ex. B at 1. These costs have been supported with the necessary documentation and are reasonable. Petitioner also requests expert fees for Dr. Joseph S. Jeret at a rate of \$530.00 per hour for 7 hours, totaling \$3,710.00. Dr. Jeret was previously awarded an hourly rate of \$500.00. I agree that this rate is appropriate. *See Bristow v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 19-457V, 2022 WL 17821111 at *6 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Nov. 15, 2022) (reducing Dr. Jeret's requested hourly rate from \$550/hour to \$500/hour). A complete invoice was submitted, and Dr. Jeret's hours appear to be reasonable. This results in a reduction of **\$210.00**.⁴

Accordingly, Petitioner is entitled to final attorneys' fees in the amount of \$4,873.12.

II. Conclusion

In accordance with the Vaccine Act, 42 U.S.C. §15(e) (2018), the undersigned has reviewed the billing records and costs in this case and finds that Petitioner's request for fees and costs is reasonable. Based on the above analysis, the undersigned finds that it is reasonable to compensate Petitioner and his counsel as follows:

Attorneys' Fees Requested	\$20,874.60
(Reduction to Fees)	-
Total Attorneys' Fees Awarded	\$20,874.60
Attorneys' Costs Requested	\$4,873.12
(Reduction to Costs)	(\$210.00)
Total Attorneys' Costs Awarded	\$4,873.12
Total Attorneys' Fees and Costs	\$25,747.72

Accordingly, the undersigned awards a lump sum in the amount of \$25,747.72, representing reimbursement for Petitioner's attorneys' fees and costs, in the form of a check payable to Petitioner and his counsel, Ms. Bridget McCullough.

In the absence of a motion for review filed pursuant to RCFC Appendix B, the clerk of the court is directed to enter judgment herewith.⁵

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/Herbrina D. Sanders
Herbrina D. Sanders
Special Master

⁴ (\$530.00 - \$500.00) x 7 hrs. = \$210.00.

⁵ Pursuant to Vaccine Rule 11(a), entry of judgment can be expedited by the parties' joint filing of notice renouncing the right to seek review.